



**UNITED NATIONS MISSION IN SIERRA LEONE
(UNAMSIL)**

**PRESS BRIEFING HIGHLIGHTS
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Near Verbatim

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Umaru Fofana: Good afternoon members of the press. I would like to welcome you to this briefing. I am sitting in this week for my boss, the Chief Public Information Officer, Mr Kemal Saiki who is on vacation. I would like to inform you that we are joined by two distinguished ladies, Madam Theresa Kambobe whom is UNAMSIL's Gender Specialist and Mrs Jebbeh Foster who works for the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM). They will be talking to you later on about the International Women's Day which is on Monday March 8. But first to the highlights for this week.

Highlights:

UNAMSIL FORCE COMMANDER MEETS SIERRA LEONE'S CHIEF OF DEFENCE STAFF

Freetown - The Force Commander of the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL), Major General Sajjad Akram on Tuesday 2 March met the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) of the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF), Major General Edwin Sam-Mbomah at his Force Headquarters office at Mammy Yoko in Freetown.

Welcoming the CDS and members of his entourage, the Force Commander said the meeting was "a unique opportunity to rub minds" but "more importantly" to discuss details of UNAMSIL's drawdown plan and how to completely hand over security to the Sierra Leone security forces.

General Akram said that such meetings would provide the avenue for bringing into focus those areas of training, relevant to the RSLAF where UNAMSIL could be of assistance. He pointed out that the handing over of security primacy to the national security agencies was already on; adding that security in the northern provincial district of Bombali had just been successfully handed over. He urged the RSLAF to participate more actively in training exercises organized by UNAMSIL in preparation for the final withdrawal of the peacekeepers.

Responding, Major General Sam-Mbomah said that with the drawdown and eventual pull-out of UNAMSIL, he had urged the United Nations through the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in a recent meeting in Abuja, Nigeria to leave behind a “formidable force” to prevent the situations in Liberia and Cote d’Ivoire from spilling over into Sierra Leone, thereby rendering futile the peace efforts of UNAMSIL.

Other senior military officers in attendance were UNAMSIL’s Deputy Force Commander, Brigadier Adrian Foster; Commanders of UNAMSIL’s Sector West, Brigadier General Nuhu Bamali, Sector Centre Brigadier General Shaffik Uzzaman and Sector East Col. Sajjad Ahmed Bakshi. From the RSLAF were Commander Joint Force Headquarters, Brigadier General MA Alli; Commander 3rd Brigade Colonel SA Sina, Commander 4th Brigade Colonel FK Kamara, Commander 5th Brigade Colonel KSM Mondeh and the Director of Commitment and Plans Colonel SO Williams.

SRSG JOINS VOICE OF CHILDREN IN CELEBRATING FIRST ANNIVERSARY

Freetown - The Special Representative of the Secretary-General, Ambassador Daudi Ngelautwa Mwakawago on Saturday 28 February led members of the Voice of Children (VoC) in marking the first anniversary of the official launch of the project. The anniversary was celebrated with a “Soup Kitchen activity” which saw 1,000 children from different child rights organisations fed, with the first girl being served by Ambassador Mwakawago. Jordanian medical doctors serving in UNAMSIL rendered free medical treatment for common ailments to the kids, while counseling on HIV/AIDS was offered for voluntary testing.

Speaking at the ceremony at Victoria Park in Freetown, Ambassador Mwakawago expressed joy at being part of “a watershed in the advocacy for children by children and the first such initiative of its kind anywhere in the world,” that gave voice to children. He said the ten-year civil war in Sierra Leone affected children greatly both as victims and perpetrators, adding that no amount of attention paid to children would be enough for them. He said the essence of the VoC was to “restore to Sierra Leone’s children their humanity and confidence; to rebuild in them a sense of trust and belonging, after the nightmarish experience of widespread distrust and wanton but deliberate violence” through the use of radio as “a mass medium for education, information, social mobilization and communication, to address the realities of war for the children of Sierra Leone”

The SRSG condemned the use of children by adults “to fight their [adults’] war for them, saying “This has got to stop”. He called on adults to show “pride and a sense of real responsibility” in promoting and protecting children, something he said the VoC sought to do. He urged children to “demand from their parents and society at large: protection, quality education and space to be children.”

While saying that the formative period of childhood once lost could never be regained, the SRSG said the withdrawal of UNAMSIL should not mean the end of the Voice of Children. “Sierra Leoneans will increasingly be in the driver’s seat, taking the destiny of their country in their own hands; and what better way to go about it than to prepare the younger generations to fully play their rightful role in this endeavor. UNAMSIL eventual withdrawal will not mean the demise of the Voice of Children. The Voice of Children will continue. It should continue to live for as long as children continue to live in Sierra Leone and it should serve as an example to emulate and disseminate in those countries where other children continue to be the victims of senseless conflicts and exploitation.”

In his statement read on his behalf by a teenage boy, Robert Konuwa, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children And Armed Conflict, Ambassador Olara Otunnu said he was “delighted to hear that...the members of [the Voice of Children] project, despite the limited time, space, and resources, have managed to...learn the basics of broadcasting by attending highly intensive training sessions”

Ambassador Otunnu thanked the VoC for giving a voice to the children of Sierra Leone “by expressing yours and your peers’ views on different issues affecting you. You have been able to teach young people about children’s rights, about the UN, about their country and other countries.” He went on to say that the work of the children had not only helped their contemporaries but also “helped in the healing and reconstruction of Sierra Leone and in rebuilding peace.” He said the success of the project had attracted requests for similar projects “from Colombia and from a group of Liberian children”.

In her keynote, the Executive Secretary of The National Commission for War Affected Children (NACWAC), Mrs Bintu Magona, who is also a member of the VoC’s Advisory Board said the VoC had given the children of Sierra Leone “the opportunity to articulate their views on issues that affect their lives and at the same time encouraged them to participate in nation building.” She expressed the hope that “before long the VoC will serve as an instrument for reviving school broadcasting programmes by producing more educational programmes in line with the school curriculum”

Deputising her Minister, the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Social Welfare and Children’s Affairs, Ms Sarrah Lewis acknowledged the role of the VoC “towards ensuring that then rights of the child and welfare of children are protected and promoted”. She reaffirmed her Ministry’s commitment “to make the Voice of Children grow from strength to strength”, pledging that the children’s efforts do not go in vain. Ms Lewis highlighted the plight of the country’s street children, saying “today’s feeding programme is yet another symbolic way of highlighting the situation of children in our country”.

Voice of Children, a project of the Public Information Section which started off with 5 programmes on Radio UNAMSIL, now puts out 12 programmes including on two additional radio stations – the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Service (SLBS) and Believers Broadcasting Network (BBN) which is a religious broadcaster.

Side attractions were provided by local performing artists including “Sisters with Attitude”, the Young Professionals comedy group, Milton Margai School for the Blind and the Voice of Children comedy and drama group.

UNAMSIL Force Commander Bids Farewell to GHANBATT 8, Pays Working Visit To KENBATT 12, Sector Centre

Freetown - The Force Commander of the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL), Major General Sajjad Akram recently paid a farewell visit to the eighth Battalion (GHANBATT 8) at the international airport town of Lungi, in the northern district of Port Loko, as they prepare to leave the Mission area after a successful completion of their 6-month tour of duty.

Addressing officers and soldiers of the battalion, Major General Akram said that they had contributed tremendously to the success of UNAMSIL, and also thanked them for their renovation of schools, churches, mosques and the construction of bridges despite their operational and training tasks. He wished them a safe return to their country.

The Force Commander also paid his maiden visit to troops of the twelfth Kenyan battalion (KENBATT 12) in Masiaka, also in Port Loko district, who have been here since September 2003. Welcoming the Force Commander, the Commanding Officer, Lt. Col. Roosevelt Nzomo Nguku gave a brief on the operational readiness of the battalion, its deployment on the ground, the welfare of the troops and the general security situation in Masiaka, which he described as “cool and calm”.

The Force Commander expressed confidence in the capacity of the unit, but, however entreated them to emulate their predecessors whom he said did not only excel in military operations but also in providing humanitarian assistance to their host communities.

Maj. Gen. Akram later proceeded to the Headquarters of Sector Centre at Magburaka, northern province, where the Sector Commander, Brig Gen Shaffiq Uzzaman briefed him on the deployment, and the handing over of security primacy of the northern district of Bombali to the Sierra-Leone Police.

Also in Magburaka, Gen Akram in his capacity as UNAMSIL Chief Military Observer, visited Military Observers serving in the area, whom he applauded for their “active participation in the on-going electoral process” through the distribution of electoral materials to the districts and the success of the mines survey conducted in the general area.

In another development, Maj. Gen. Akram inaugurated the Sierra-Bangla Friendly Agricultural Project of livestock and crops at Rokumbi. Speaking at the occasion, the Force Commander noted that Sierra Leone had vast agricultural resources that could be harnessed to improve food self-sufficiency and eradicate hunger. He urged the people to maintain their agricultural development strides in the locality.

Responding, the District Agricultural Officer for Tonkolili, Mr. Saffa Kallon expressed appreciation for UNAMSIL's contributions towards the development of Sierra Leone, promising to complement her effort by providing insecticides for use on the farm.

In the southern province of Moyamba, the Commanding Officer of the fifth Nepalese Battalion (NEPBATT 5) stationed there, Lt Col Dilis Bikram Rana informed the Force Commander that their mission was to assist the Government of Sierra Leone within its area of responsibility in the maintenance of law and order, in conjunction with other national security agencies. A mission, which according to him, has been tenaciously pursued till date.

Umaru Fofana: That's about it for our highlights, on which note I would like to happily hand you over to Madam Theresa Kombobe, UNAMSIL's gender specialist to tell us about Monday's international women's celebration. Madam Kombobe.

Theresa Kombobe: Thank you very much. As you all may be aware, on Monday 8th March Sierra Leone would be joining the rest of the world in observing the International Women's day. I hope you remember that International Women's Day is an occasion marked by women all over the world to review their struggle for equality, justice, peace and development throughout the world. It's noted in the struggle for women to participate throughout the world on equal basis with men...and in Sierra Leone the day is being celebrated under the theme: Reduce Poverty, Eliminate Discrimination And Violence Against Women. The international theme on the other hand is "Women and HIV/AIDS". This is in recognition of the fact that women are at a distinct disadvantage biologically, compared to men in terms of contracting the disease. It has been reported that male to female transmission is likely to occur than female to male. In fact studies have shown that women are twice as likely as men to contract HIV from a single episode of unprotected sex. Also, we know that there are more women in sub-Saharan Africa infected with the virus than men. I'm sure my colleague will give you statistics about Sierra Leone. Beyond the biological aspect of the disease, we recognize the rampant issue of violence against women which is the theme in this country and which also contributes to the increase in women's vulnerability to HIV/AIDS. We know that the issue of violence against women in Sierra Leone, particularly domestic violence but also the rape of young children between the age 2 – 15 years is a common occurrence...and hence this year's theme. When this violence is allowed and tolerated it will reinforce discriminatory practices and subordination of women...so strategies that addressed this issue and other issues which result in discrimination against women need to be put in place. And in the fight against poverty, discrimination and violence against women, women's education is very paramount. As a country and an African country, we need to encourage the education of the girl child by equal opportunities through mobilizing. You know by

abolishing fees, offering financial incentives to keep girls in school and also a change in attitude towards girl education...which in most societies is not valid...So briefly that what it is.

Umaru Fofana: Thank you very much Madam Kambobe. Now we join Mrs Jebbeh Foster from UNIFEM.

Mrs Jebbeh Foster: Just to, maybe, reiterate the things Mrs. Kambobe has said and that is on the international women's day this year. UNIFEM is drawing attention to...em...the gender imbalances as far as the HIV/AIDS pandemic is concerned and is calling on all nations to go back or we need a commitment to addressing issues relating to gender and HIV/AIDS. Next year...well maybe currently people are preparing for the Beijing plus ten conference and they would be giving their report on how far they have gone with progress on the commitment they made in Beijing in 1995 and I think from this country there was a large delegation comprising people from the Ministry of Gender Affairs and also from many NGOs. Now ten years later we want to take stock of the commitments that were made at that conference...individually and also as a group. And one of the things that we need to look at is HIV/AIDS and women especially on issues like violence against women which really make women very, very vulnerable to HIV/AIDS. And this year I think the Ministry of Social Welfare together with its partners, including UNIFEM will be focusing on violence against women, poverty and HIV/AIDS. Em... on this Saturday the Ministry will join International Rescue Committee (IRC) to celebrate the first year of the Rainbow Centre and UNIFEM on its part is also making its contribution to that particular issue. In that we are supporting the National Commission for Democracy and Human Rights to come up with training manual on violence against women and this manual would be looking at ways at which they can sensitize communities nationwide on issues relating to violence against women... and also developing strategies with these communities on how they can address these issues...and they would be looking at certain specific issues mainly on how to refer cases to the appropriate authorities. Now we know that these things are dealt with on domestic levels or even if you go to the law enforcement agents, victims are encouraged to settle these issues at home. But we feel that these issues should be given the prominence they deserve and they would be teaching communities through this manual they are developing on how to refer the cases to the appropriate authorities. And then also on how to mobilize communities...women, men I mean everybody in the community to have a zero-tolerance on issues related to violence against women. And also supporting victims of violence against women...not just supporting them in terms of medication but making them realize that they haven't done anything wrong...that they are victims ...they have nothing to be ashamed of but give them the kind of support that would give them the opportunity to take the issue further. And then also to, may be, develop some amount of shame for perpetrators of violence against women. A lot of these people in fact walk tall in their communities but we have to have a system in our communities where we can shame such people...so you know they can not just walk tall. And then also how do we engage lawmaking bodies to pass laws on issues such as domestic violence so...not just...we want to go beyond talking the issues but to take specific actions on these issues. And we want to look at what happens in other countries. If we look at it, some 45 countries have

developed specific laws on domestic violence and there is also another 21 countries drafting laws on domestic violence and we want to see where Sierra Leone is on this kind of agenda. And we feel that one reason why maybe women haven't moved ahead is that we are not making our voices heard on these issues and lots of other issues...especially the Local Government elections...we are encouraging women to use this opportunity to get into elective offices at their local communities where they really have great opportunity to make their voices heard. We are not the only country in transition. We can learn from what is happening in Rwanda, for example who, after their crisis have 48% of women in their new Parliament and 50% of the judges in the newly-constituted Supreme Court are women. So UNIFEM is encouraging women in Sierra Leone in 2004 to come out to make their voices heard. Thank you.

Question and Answers:

Question: I'm Agnes Pratt from The News newspaper. This question is directed to the representative from UNIFEM. I would like to know what your organization is doing to help women in Bonthe district in relation to violence against women and HIV/AIDS

Jebbeh Foster: We are not directly involved in local communities. What we do is to work with national bodies. We are working actively with the National AIDS Secretariat...what we are doing is trying to assist the National AIDS Secretariat to engender the national programme on HIV/AIDS. Now Sierra Leone has got about US\$15 million from the World Bank to address HIV/AIDS in the country, and 50% of the amount will go to Civil Society organizations. So NGOs - I know there are a lot of them working in Bonthe - should use this opportunity to access funds and really have programmes. Now one of the workshops we are having from March 20-23 is for Civil Society organizations and basically to assist them to develop gender sensitive HIV/AIDS programmes and also assist them develop their capacity to mainstream HIV/AIDS into their other programmes. If there is any organization in Bonthe interested I think they should get in touch with the National AIDS Secretariat and see how they can get on board these programmes. And also for issues of Local Government.

Question: What are you doing anything out there to sensitize the people on issue like early marriage and teenage pregnancy? And the second question is I want to know your input in relation to violence against women in society.

Theresa Kambobe: I think I will start. We've done a lot in terms of training the Sierra Leone Police and we are doing a lot of work with the issue on violence against women and other serious issues like the Human Rights Section for which I work, have been doing a lot of work with the police, even to treat violence against women particularly as a crime that needs to be taken seriously. On our part also we've been working, as Jebbeh said, with local human rights organizations... promoting the rights of women which cuts across all spectrums. We are talking about...you know non-discrimination ...we are talking about promoting girl child education...we are talking about...the promotion of women empowerment especially economically. Last week we had a workshop in Moyamba 9in the southern province) where we trained 30 women so that they could go

back and talk to girls in schools about these issues. They themselves decided that the issues they want to address are issues of violence against women and they've already started going to schools. So far they have visited some schools talking to girls about these issues. So there is a lot going on and of course there is a lot more to be done. Thank you.

Question: Abdul S. Bangura representing The Independent newspaper. As you have the International Women's Day celebration on Monday, I want to know whether you have on your agenda the criminal exploitation of women.

Theresa Kambobe: Well I think for us in UNAMSIL, we work through a certain mandate. But of course as I say we look at the whole issue of women's rights and as I say women's rights involve pertinent issues such as poverty, discrimination, violence against women even HIV/AIDS...these issues are linked because they all came from the issue of first discrimination against women resulting in poverty....resulting in women being infected with HIV/AIDS. Firstly because of poverty and its ramifications...so we are involved in our own way. We are also involved in the activities that are going on. I'm sure you are aware of what is happening in Makeni which is being spearheaded by the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs where people will be presenting national papers on these thematic issues and we are involved because we are doing some activities here at Mammy Yoko where we will have people present papers on the same issues...so that a lot of what we are doing become policies for the women out there in Bonthe...for the women out there in Kailahun who have never heard anything. So this is important. But I think all of us have to play our parts. I think the media too have a role to play.

Question: Good afternoon, I'm Victoria a researcher from Nigeria. I would like to know what your views are on violence perpetrated by women against women. How are you handling that aspect? Specifically I mean the genital mutilation such as the Bondo Society.

Jebbeh Foster: First of all I want to note that in Sierra Leone female circumcision is a nationwide practice...and there are lots of reasons why it is practiced. And I think the issue has been addressed in different quarters. It is something that has to do with even the customary marriage in Sierra Leone...so there are lots of implications. It's not just so easy banning female circumcision ...then also there is debate about the kind of circumcision that is carried out in Sierra Leone. Could you refer to it as mutilation? Is there evidence in Sierra Leone that female circumcision has led to HIV/AIDS? These are all the debates that are going on and they have not been concluded. And I think these are issues that are being addressed by the relevant authorities. For a long time there has been a silence on the issue of female circumcision for a lot of reasons – culturally politically and otherwise – and I think the silence has been broken. And I think we should address it in a sensitive manner. It's part of the tradition of our people and we need to respect it.

Question: Abdul Bangura again. My concern is for workers of the Voice of Children (VoC) Project in UNAMSIL. This is for you Mr. Umaru Fofana. I understand that a 21-

day ultimatum has been given by the workers at the VOC that they will cease broadcasting until their demands are met. Can you comment on that?

Umaru Fofana: I'm not sure of that. To the best of my knowledge those staff working at the VoC are employees of the UN Mission in Sierra Leone. And I also know that there are some kids who assist the VoC on a voluntary basis. I must tell you that it's against the laws of the International Labour Organisation for children to be employed or exploited. The UN does not employ children. Those children working with the VOC project are working on a voluntary basis... to learn on the job and to service their colleague children especially those who are not that fortunate to be part of Voice of Children.

Any more questions?... Since no more, that's how we end this week's. Thank you again for coming. See you next week.